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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study of at-risk secondary school students and the outcomes of the school-based interventions they were involved with. Information was gathered from 28 Black, Hispanic, and White students through field notes and audio recordings. The students came from homes with a low-average educational attainment and themselves had identifiable literacy problems. Many had a long history of behavioral problems both inside and outside the classroom, as well. The common risk intervention activities serving this population were as follows: (1) literacy programs before school, after school, or pullout; (2) teacher mentors and community or business mentors to encourage positive adult role models; (3) private business and industry contributing technology and work-study programs; and (4) appointment of at-risk program coordinators within school districts and at-risk counselors for individual campuses. These case studies illustrate the complexity of the problems and solutions as well as the excitement and frustration encountered in attempting to discourage students from dropping out. At-risk programs such as these appear to address the students' needs, but fail to take into account their environment and values and what role school plays therein. As a result, the programs may be inadequate in effecting long-term behavioral changes. A developed, systematic theory for understanding student engagement and disengagement is needed. Nine references are included. (CJS)

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Dealing With the Tip of the Iceberg: School Responses to At Risk Behaviors

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Dealing With The Tip of the Ice Berg: School Responses To At Risk Behaviors

Historically, one of the tasks of the schools has been to provide an academic and social springboard from which youth can begin to meld into a larger society. Problems associated with this process have at times been thought as reflecting of the genre of educational institutions, their processes and mannerisms, and not necessarily of society as a whole. As the genesis and nature of school dropout populations has become increasingly difficult to understand, and something of a national obsession (Finn, 1989), there are indications that failures to reverse at risk behaviors may, in fact, be related to factors beyond the reach of traditional educational environments.

Most research in understanding those at risk has focused on two areas: (a). estimates and correlates of reasons for dropping out and (b). programs that attempt to keep students in school (Finn, 1989). Concurrent with these efforts have been the funding of projects that have tried to redirect children, at various grade levels, who have exhibited a myriad of at risk behaviors. At the same time the development of databases tracking at risk students academic and behavioral progress from elementary school through high school also emerged. As these demographic profiles matured, the literature expanded to include both descriptions and evaluations of at risk program interventions (Rumberger, 1987).

Despite these efforts, few definitive at risk factors are generally

accepted as universal to those who may, in fact, be part of a larger group of preadolescent and adolescent youngsters who find no meaning in current educational institutions and practices. We do know, however, that dropping out is part of a long systemic process that is multifaced and varied by individual (Rumberger, 1987) and that any solutions to the dropout problem must entail programs based on the needs of students as well as on educational theory (Farrell, Peguero, Lindsey, & White, 1988)

The study described in this paper evolved from these issues. It involved students at the secondary school level identified as eliciting at risk characteristics and behaviors, examined the school based at risk interventions they were involved with, described the effects of these efforts, and looked at programmatic outcomes. The interdictions presented varied by school environment as did the efforts of individuals charged with modifying student behaviors.

Participants and Sites

Students participating in this study were enrolled in seven high schools representing five divergent school districts in a large metropolitan area in the southwestern United States. During the time of this study each of the subjects were in the ninth grade, ranged in age from fourteen to sixteen, represented African-American, Anglo, and Hispanic populations, and were equally divided as to male and female. All had been classified as being at risk according to state mandated guidelines. These guidelines included academic, behavioral and personal factors. Each had been placed in one or more school based at risk intervention programs. Criteria for individual subject selection for this study was based on counselor/principal recommendation and parental

approval. Out of an initial pool of thirty five selected participants, twenty eight completed the study.

Research Design

The major methodological research construct used in this study was the case study model. The case study is an appropriate research tool when investigating a phenomenon within its real-life context; when boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and when multiple sources of evidence are used (Yin, 1989). This study incorporated all of these criteria. As Yin (1989) notes, the use of multiple case studies allows one to generalize to theoretical propositions but not to populations or universes.

The mode in which the case study method was employed focused on non participant behavior observation. Using this type of structure allowed for a systematic method of data collection as well as an examination of the socio-environmental impact of the at risk interventions. Information was gathered through the use of field notes and audio tape recordings. After this process was completed, similarities and differences between individual and group behaviors were noted and analyzed. This was done over a one (school) year period.

It should be noted that this study was not totally qualitative, although many of the research techniques used are those identified with qualitative researchers. This study was an attempt to synthesize and aggregate by identifying what is common in all or most of the individual student cases (Ehman, Glenn, Johnson, and White, 1990). As such, the case studies reported focus on descriptions and overall effects of at risk programs and subsume individual subject behavior within them.

After selection and agreement to participate in the project, all of the students were interviewed at their home school sites. This session, held in late September, along with academic and disciplinary records, and a meeting with the counselors and parents, provided base line information about each of the study participants, including the types of academic and interpersonal behaviors that had caused them to be classified as being at risk.

In addition to the opening sessions, three other meetings with students, their parents, and counselors were held during December, April, and June. The focus of these sessions were similar to the initial discussions and included an analysis of student progress, failure, as well as reactions to current academic or behavioral problems.

Findings

Student Profiles:

Of the twenty eight student participants in this study five were African-American, with two being male and three being female, nine were Anglo, with five being male and four being female, and fourteen were Hispanic, equally divided amongst male and female. Twenty two came from single parent homes with eighteen headed by a female. Eighteen of the subjects had family incomes of under fourteen thousand dollars.

The average educational attainment within each family unit was 8.6 years for all adults living at home. Within total family units, including those adults not living at home, non high school graduates vastly outnumbered those completing secondary school. From a possible pool of fifty six natural parents, only nineteen had obtained their high

school diploma or its equivalency. The number of post secondary graduates represented in this population was eight; including three who had completed four year degree programs.

Amongst the thirty seven parents who had dropped out of school, ages of school departure and reasons for exiting varied. The median parental drop out grade was seven and the median drop out age was fifteen, but the drop out grade range was from third through twelfth while the age range was from ten to seventeen. In responding to queries as to why they left school, responses varied from personal - including pregnancy, economic - including joining the armed forces, academic, and behavioral - including non compliance with school rules.

Non completion of school was not only part of these students' parental structures, but also encompassed their siblings as well. Thirteen of the students in this study indicated that one or more of their brothers or sisters had either dropped out of school or were in special at risk programs similar to the ones in which they were participating.

All of the students in this study had an identifiable literacy problem. As two segments of the state criteria for being at risk included a reading level of two or more years below grade level or a standardized achievement test score two or more years below grade level this was to be expected. Each of the youngsters in this study met one or both of these criteria. As a result, all were enrolled in special academic programs designed to assist them in increasing their basic literacy skill levels. In addition, ten of the subjects had been classified as learning disabled and were enrolled in special education

programs.

Many of the participants also had long histories of behavioral problems. None had been expelled from school, although five had been assigned to alternative educational programs for disciplinary reasons within the past two years. Some had histories of problems with juvenile justice authorities including possession of alcohol, drugs, and burglary. The most recurring school related behavioral problems for this population were constant classroom disruptions and an inability to get along with teachers and adult authority figures.

Intervention Strategies/Case Studies:

The following are a series of case studies describing the common at risk intervention activities that served this population. Enrollment in programs varied by individual according to academic, personal, or behavioral needs. Some of the students participated in more than one at risk program.

a. Literacy Programs - Before School, After School, and Pullout

The placement of at risk youngsters in some form of literacy development program was the largest dropout intervention effort in each of the school districts in which this study took place. In fact, all of the study subjects participated in some type of literacy intervention for at least part of the study year. While these efforts varied as to methodology, curriculum concentration, and student selection, all were at the forefront in trying to both decrease at risk populations while increasing student literacy levels.

Throughout the schools three types of instructional venues were available in this area: before school, pullout, and after school

programs. The before and after school models were designed to provide "extra tutorial assistance." These classes, voluntary in nature, were provided on an as needed basis. That is, students could make appointments with any subject area teacher if they felt that they needed assistance in resolving an academic problem. Similarly, teachers could also schedule tutorial sessions any time they wished so that students who were falling behind in their class work might receive extra assistance.

Although these sessions were held on a regular basis in all of the schools, student attendance was sporadic. Some teachers described these efforts as "public relation ploys". This sentiment was rooted in individual teachers' inability to set attendance or other monitoring controls. If a student choose to skip a session or leave in the middle of an instructional activity, the instructor had no behavioral recourse.

The pullout programs were traditional classroom resource models. Using this approach, students were sent to basic skill specialists to work on particular literacy deficits. These sessions provided an opportunity to work at one's own pace in a non grade oriented environment. However, in several of the schools students were assigned to these programs in lieu of an elective which made them less than cooperative, especially at the beginning of the school year.

In addition to these "extra" programs, all of the schools could track their students in lower level subject matter classes. Each of the schools had these programs in English, social studies, science, and mathematics. The content of these courses was supposedly designed for students who were not on grade level in basic skill areas. In fact,

these classes were usually thought of, by students, teachers and parents, as a dumping ground for those who couldn't make it in a regular class. Academic content of these classes was often watered down to such an extent that many students felt that they were merely putting in time instead of learning. Instruction was centered on factual recall techniques and preparation for standardized testing.

Students participating in this study recognized that they had literacy problems, especially in the area of reading. Most also understood that they probably would need these skills to graduate, get a good job, and continue their education beyond high school. Yet there seemed to be difficulty, on their part, in operationalizing these concepts. Many felt that while reading and writing were important that they could survive without these tools. Others noted that no one in their family could read and write very well but that they were working. The value of being literate was not part of the lexicon of many of these students. The programs designed to help them in this area may have reinforced this belief as the value of being literate, for personal as well as societal needs, was not often stressed.

b. Mentors - Teacher Mentors and Community Mentors

One of the characteristics that at risk students tend to display is an inability to develop positive relationships with teachers, adults, and even peers who may assume the role of an authority figure (Pallas, 1986). In an attempt to change these attitudes, and to try to provide positive adult role models, all of the schools in this study engaged in some form of mentor programming for at risk students.

The conceptual framework for these efforts was set in the notion that

environmental and family factors of those at risk might contribute to their inability to succeed in school. As such, the mentor could provide an outside stimulus, or role model, that would encourage school success and, at the same time, provide an alternative value model.

Two types of mentor projects were used in these schools. One was school based, the other had a community/business orientation. School based mentors were teachers who had agreed to work with one or more at risk students before, after or during school. Some of the teachers had gone through an extensive mentor training program, while others, untrained in working with this type of student were also used. The community/business mentors came from a wide range of individuals. Most were minority business people seeking to help youngsters from their communities stay in school. Training within this group also varied, as did their individual commitments to students. Both groups used literacy development as their major interpersonal communications component.

Students related that they felt that both these programs provided them with an opportunity to meet an adult figure, on a regular basis, in a non threatening mode. For some, this was a unique experience. The difficulty that most students noted about these programs was the establishment of an on going rapport with their mentor. Some of the students wanted an interpersonal relationship that many of the mentors were unwilling to provide. This was especially true of the community group who, more often than not, kept a strictly business like attitude when meeting with students. The teacher mentors all recognized the interpersonal needs of their students. Some became very close, while others, like those in the community group, sought to remain

professionally distant.

Structures for school success were not present in many of the study group's home environments. The mentor programs sought to bring these values to the students through an outside intervention. However, the interactions the mentors provided were often limited in scope, time, and follow through. For some youngsters the simple act of listening and talking with an adult was enough. Others needed a more fulfilling adult/child relationship than the mentor could provide.

c. School Business Partnerships

In recent years private business and industry has provided schools with money and leadership to develop programs that might alter dropout behaviors. Some efforts have concentrated on giving schools access to technology, such as the IBM Write to Read Program, so that instruction and literacy development for at risk populations might be improved, others, as provided by the Xerox Corporation, have offered training in motivation, another set of business leaders have even developed alternative school structures, such as the Corporate/Community School operating in Chicago. No matter the circumstance, each of these has at its heart some form of business/education partnership.

All of the school districts who participated in this study were working with the local business community in at risk projects. Some were involved in mentoring programs, a few had received monies for special projects, while others were participating in an alternative education experiment that was sponsored by a national fast food chain. Several of the students in the study group were participants in this project.

Housed in a community building, this innovation allowed at risk and those who had already dropped out a chance to reinvest in the educational system while working. A combination of work experience and basic skills training made up the core curriculum. What made this program unique was that the students were paid to go to school. At the time of this study fifty four students from three of the school districts were enrolled with a waiting list of one hundred and twelve. An extensive evaluation of this program's effectiveness had not occurred because of its newness. However, students indicated that they liked the curriculum and the fact that they were being treated like adults in a work place atmosphere.

Within this urban area the business community was taking a strong but quiet role in these district's at risk programs. In designing mentor, skill development, and direct assistance programs, business and industry viewed the schools as investments in their future work force. However, these same groups were also hesitant about providing more funds until the "inefficiencies were filtered from the school systems." This dichotomy had both philosophical as well as political ramifications attached to it as pressure to reform state and local school finance procedures were at the forefront of state legislative debate during the course of this study.

d. School Counselor Programs

State mandated guidelines required that all of these school districts have an at risk program coordinator. Parallel to this regulation was another that authorized individual secondary schools to name one of its counselor's the campus at risk counselor. This person was to have the

responsibility of monitoring, implementing, and evaluating all school based at risk activities.

Within the study schools, the role of the at risk counselor varied. In some, major responsibilities were limited to the areas of data collection and on going program maintenance. In others, creative efforts in terms of offering various classes and activities as well as seeking external funding for at risk projects were encouraged.

The definition of the at risk counselor's role was determined by the school's principal. If the principal took an aggressive stance with these students the counselor followed. If a passive posture was the chief administrator's style, the counselor behaved in a like manner.

Most of the students, and few of the parents, did not know that each campus had an at risk counselor. Their interactions with the counseling staff were usually limited to the student's assigned counselor.

While many of the at risk counselors would have liked to play a more active role in providing intervention services, most were already over burdened with other individual and group activities. They viewed the at risk counselor's role as an additional responsibility with no additional resources attached. Most already dealt with many of the at risk population on a daily basis and felt that this was an unnecessary job.

Principals, however, provided a different view of the at risk counselor. Most believed that the at risk counselor should lead drop out related activities. Several indicated that these should include "new and creative ways to deal with these type of kids."

Conclusions and Implications

To set up a viable at risk intervention program it is necessary to gain some understanding of the population one is dealing with that goes beyond attendance records, test scores, promotion records, and guidance referrals and should include inquires into the lives of students and how school fits into them (Farrell, Peguero, Lindsey, and White, 1988). The programs described here are typical of many at interventions in that they appear to do this, but, in fact,fail to capture all of these elements. For example, is enrolling a youngster in a literacy program enough to cause that student to want to read. Can a once a week mentor provide the type of on going positive adult structure that this type of adolescent population needs ?

In an effort to deal with those at risk, schools are caught in a social service trap. Providing programs that only focus on obvious academic and interpersonal difficulties has not reversed dropout patterns. Yet, trying to develop a systemic community oriented at risk prevention model would not only be costly, but probably unacceptable to many who might view these efforts as beyond the purview of educational institutions.

A youngster's leaving school before graduation may be just one more event in a chain that may have begun years before (Finn, 1989). Dropping out is a culminating event, well planned and well thought out. In attempting to reverse this process we have come to understand that the needs of students at risk are numerous, programs to serve them diverse, and that a systematic theory for understanding student engagement and disengagement is still in a primitive state (Finn, 1991). Because of this we may well be at an impasse in devising effective

interventions towards reducing the dropout rate. (Finn, 1991).

The case studies presented here illustrate both excitement and frustration in this process. Within these, positive acceptance of some at risk interventions was usually countered by frustration on the part of others who had been rejected. At the close of the study year, six of the students in the study group had left school, four others were "thinking of quitting", and five had made plans to transfer to other schools in an effort to try toturn their school problems around.

If we measure at risk interventions by sheer numbers, the overall programmatic effects presented in these ccase studies were probably failures. Looked at in individual circumstance, however, there were measures of success. Complete success can not be determined, however, until each of these youngsters takes something from the schools that they can carry with them throughout their lives.

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